

a lauren holbrook novel | book 3  
e r y n n m a n g u m

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*To Nama, a.k.a Eloise Terry, for calling me about the characters in this series, correcting drafts, having suggestions, and giving me the most amazing example of what marriage looks like.*

*I love you so much!*

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and works at everything with diligence. I'm very proud of you for who you are and what you've accomplished.

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Cayce, because she sat on my bed and talked girl-talk for hours really late at night, watches our yearly "Worst Movie Ever" and likes it, gets into giggling fits and can't stop, and is the bravest girl I know. You're my sister, but you're also my best friend.

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# Chapter One

An Ode to Weddings  
by Lauren Emma Holbrook

*What light through yonder window brings?*

*It is the sound of dear ones' weddings.*

*The sounds of joy, the sounds of tears,*

*The sounds of music, the sounds of fears.*

*The smell of flowers, the taste of cake,*

*The look of elegance and that touch of lace.*

*Of kisses and curling irons and mothers' loud  
crying,*

*Of doorbells and gifts brought and plants now  
dying.*

*Of weekends and ribbons and endless thanks to  
send,*

*This is the ode to weddings we give.*

“So what do you think?” I ask Hannah, holding my hands over my head.

She looks up, her nose wrinkling. “Uh, no offense, Laurie, but I’d stick to photography.”

“It’s not *that* bad.”

“Laur, *send* and *give* don’t rhyme.”

“Well, that’s a haiku, or whatever they’re called. You know. The poems that don’t rhyme.”

She waves the paper at me. “Yeah, but the rest of it *does* rhyme! Okay, maybe not the bit about cake and lace.”

I grin at her.

“And why are you holding your arms up like that?”

I keep them on my head. “Because the lace around the sleeve line itches.”

She rolls her eyes and walks away, taking my poem with her. No doubt to show whatever high-up-in-Hollywood producer may be here.

Someone makes a loud announcement, and I turn to grin at my dad and his blushing bride of thirty-seven minutes coming through the double doors. The Hyatt is bustling, tuxed-out waiters and waitresses scrambling, guests applauding, and all my little nieces and nephews yelling.

And Dad’s grinning like I haven’t seen in . . . come to think of it, I haven’t *ever* seen him smile like that.

Joan Abbot Holbrook, my new stepmom, sends me a wink

and turns to hug her daughter, Ruthie.

This wedding clinches it for me. I have now been a bridesmaid three times: first at my sister Laney's wedding, next at my good friend Ruby's wedding, and now here.

According to the old saying, I will now never be a bride.

Pity.

Maybe being maid of honor twice cancels out two of the bridesmaids. I will have to read up on this. I was maid of honor for my other sister, Lexi's, wedding, and I was maid of honor two weeks ago at a very special wedding between two very special people who had been engaged nearly an entire year and finally tied the knot.

My two best friends, Brandon and Hannah Knox.

Dad comes over, and I wrap my arms around his neck. "Congratulations, Dad." I grin, feeling tears sting the back of my eyes.

*Again.* I sobbed like a leaky sprinkler head through the entire ceremony, trying to hide it behind the huge bouquet of orange carnations I held.

Yes, I know. *Orange.* And carnations! My new stepmother does not have very good taste in flowers or colors.

But that's another story.

Dad hugs me tight and kisses the top of my head like he used to when I was a little girl. "You look beautiful, Laurie-girl."

"Thank you, Dad." I lean toward his ear and lower my voice. "We have a slight problem."

"Oh dear."

"Um, something has happened to the cake," I whisper. "It's not here."

All through the last six weeks, my dad and Joan couldn't

stop talking about this amazing lime green and orange cake they discovered, which happen to be Joan's favorite colors and subsequently the colors of my living room and study.

Dad pats my cheek. "Not to worry, dear. It's here. It's probably refrigerating."

Note here: I have no experience with wedding cakes other than consumption. This statement seems perfectly normal.

"Oh, okay," I say.

"You'll remember to water my plants while we're gone, right?" he asks.

I smile and reassure him for the seventh time. "Yes, Dad."

"They're very delicate. They need care, Lauren. Don't forget."

"I won't, Dad."

I hate live plants.

Dad and Joan are going on a week-long honeymoon to Baltimore, of all places, to attend a seminar on germ awareness and health consciousness at Johns Hopkins.

How romantic!

Dad and Joan are so excited they can hardly wait.

"Josh will take us to the airport since he's going to be driving back that way anyway," Dad says.

Josh is Joan's son. He and his wife, Kerrienne, are staying here at the Hyatt.

"Sounds good, Dad."

"There was something else I was going to tell you." He frowns at the thought.

And I suddenly realize how different things are going to be from now on.

*Very different.*

I bite back tears. *Lord, please help me to stop crying!*

Dad sighs, shrugs, and smiles. “I don’t remember.”

“That’s okay, Dad.”

He pats my shoulder. “Excuse me, Honey, Joan’s calling.”

He goes back over to Joan, who is decked out in a long, prom-style ivory dress.

Meanwhile, the bridesmaids are wearing, yep, orange.

I look icky in orange, and if I start crying again, my red nose isn’t going to help matters.

I hear paper rustling, and someone clears his throat behind me. Ryan Palmer stands there, brow wrinkling, his bow tie slightly off center. He’s holding my poem.

“Did you . . . um, really write this?” he asks.

I glare at him, wiping my wrist under my eyes. “It is not that bad! Sheesh, you and Hannah.” I reach over and fix his tie, sniffing.

He grins his little-kid smile at me, and I smile back. Joan was nice and let Ryan be one of the ushers, to his sheer delight—mostly, I think, because the ushers get to wear top hats.

To Ryan, any hat is a chance to smooth down his curly hair.

“Are you crying?” he asks, tipping his head as he looks at me.

“No.”

“So the water swimming around in there is what? Rewetting drops?” His expression softens, and he wraps me in a hug.

*Drat.* Affection. Now the tears are doubling up.

“Okay, enough hugging,” I say, pulling away and using my knuckle to dab at the corner of my eye. “I’m trying not to cry. Mascara. Eye shadow. Rudolph noses. Crying is bad. Quick. Distract me,” I plead, sniffing.

He gives me a look and then nods. “So where’s this cake?” he asks, glancing around. Ryan was there for several of the conversations Dad and Joan had about the cake.

*Good. Good change of subject.* I blink rapidly and the tears mostly disappear. “I have no idea. I’m a little scared about it.”

“Why?”

“Well, first, because we can’t find it. Second, because we can’t find it. And third, because neither Dad nor Joan like or even support the general idea of sweets.”

Ryan’s eyebrows go up in understanding. “Ah. I might not have cake.”

“Right. It could be made with barley or whatever flour is in their nutritional magazines these days.”

He makes a face and I grin, tears gone.

Ruby Amery, who is Ryan’s sister, my former coworker, and a new mom of four months, comes over carrying baby Adrienne.

“Hey, guys, Nick and I are heading out pretty quick. I’ve got to get Adrienne down for the night. Lauren, the wedding was beautiful, and your dad looked great.” She smiles, her brown eyes reflecting the candle glow.

Over the last year, she’s taken on what I like to call the “New Mom” hairstyle—long, unruly, and in desperate need of a haircut that I guess she hasn’t had time to get. Tonight, though, it is up in a bun, a few shorter strands falling around her face.

She looks beautiful.

I take Adrienne from her without asking. “Hi, wittle baby gwirl,” I coo, kissing the baby’s soft forehead. Adrienne is a tiny little girl with tons of dark, dark, dark brown hair and big brown eyes that are always wide open.

She blinks at me confusedly.

“Get used to that expression, Kiddo,” Ryan tells his niece.

“Funny, Ryan.”

Ruby kisses my cheek, takes her baby back, and goes to corral

her husband, who is the singles' pastor at our church.

Something short slams into my legs, and I look down to see my year-old niece, Allie, tangled in the long mess of tulle and satin.

I heft her up and she grins a baby smile, grabbing my cheeks in her hands. "Dom me goom?" she baby-talks, leaning forward until she is an inch away from my eyeballs.

Allie and her twin brother, Mikey, have three older siblings—the other set of twins, Jack and Jess, now four, and the big sister of them all, Dorie, now a mature six. All of my sister Laney's kids got her blonde hair except Allie and Dorie, who both ended up with beautiful, silky, shiny brown hair from Laney's husband, Adam.

"What are you doing running around unsupervised?" I ask Allie, holding her back a few inches. She likes to invade my circle of space.

She giggles at something behind me, and I turn to see Ryan making faces at her.

"Hey, I am in the middle of a serious discussion," I say to him.

He grins and takes Allie from me, tossing her in the air. She shrieks with laughter.

"Laurie, with you, nothing is a serious discussion."

"Hmph. I want my niece back."

He throws her in the air again. "Mm. No."

"Hey!"

Someone hits a water glass with a knife, silencing Ryan's comeback. He catches Allie and settles her into the crook of his arm. She shoves three fingers in her mouth, staring at her new aunt, Ruthie, who is doubling as maid of honor and wedding coordinator.

"Everyone, may I have your attention?" she says sweetly. "We're now going to bring out the cake and start the toasts, if you would kindly take your seats."

Ryan, Allie, and I sit at the table we are nearest to, and Dad and Joan take their places at the front table.

The door to the kitchen opens, and two waiters carry in the cake.

I slam my hands over my mouth, and Ryan covers his eyes. Allie coos.

“Do not laugh, Laur, do not!” Ryan hisses, his shoulders shaking.

“I can’t help it!”

Celery spears and carrot sticks are arranged in the shape of a three-tiered cake, a plastic bride and groom perched precariously on top.